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ISAAC MAYER WISE AND THE
COLLEGE HE BUILT

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JACOB RADER MARCUS

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BIOGRAPHY

ISAAC Mayer Wise was born in Steingrub, Bohemia, March 29, 1819. After a brief career as a rabbi in Radnitz, Bohemia, he came to the United States in 1846, and was elected rabbi in Albany, New York. He entered upon a career of religious reform, and soon became one of the outstanding Jewish religious leaders in this land. In 1854 he was elected rabbi of Temple Bene Yeshurun in Cincinnati, and occupied this position the rest of his life. The very year of his arrival in Cincinnati he founded *The Israelite*, an Anglo-Jewish newspaper; the following year, *Die Deborah*, which was published in German. He was a prolific writer: belles-lettres, histories, theologies, polemics, and rituals flowed from his fluent pen. Wise's efforts were chiefly directed, however, toward the organization of American Jewry, and after years of intensive labor were marked by success. In 1873 he inspired the founding of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, and two years later his association of Jewish synagogues established the Hebrew Union College, a rabbinical seminary for American Jews. Finally, in 1889, the alumni of the College and other rabbis joined to create the Central Conference of American Rabbis. In all three institutions Wise's will was dominant. He was easily the most distinguished organizer and leader of American Reform Jewry. He died in Cincinnati, March 26, 1900.

The following address was delivered in his honor on Founder's Day, March 28, 1959, in the chapel of the Hebrew Union College.

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Isaac Mayer Wise
and
The College He Built

THE BET HA-MIDRASH

ACCORDING to the Bible, we are descended from Shem, the son of Noah. Shem and his great-grandson Eber were the reputed ancestors of the Semites and the Hebrews. Tradition has it that those two men conducted a *bet ha-midrash*, a college, and Jacob, we are told, attended their academy.

This rabbinic projection into the past is but a reflection of the important part that the institution of the college has played in the history of the Jewish people. No story is more familiar than that of how Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai saved Judaism during the siege of Jerusalem in the first century of the Christian Era. Because the rabbi had refused to participate in the rebellion against Rome, the Emperor Vespasian asked him what he sought as reward. And the simple answer of Ben Zakkai was: "Give me Jabneh and its sages." Let me have my school.

The college that saved a people and a religion, the college that flourished in the Palestinian village of Jabneh, was a forerunner of a thousand others which have dotted the landscape in a hundred countries and provinces for the last two thousand years. The academy became the intellectual fatherland of the Jews. Wherever there were a desk and a folio, there was home. The school preserved the cultural heritage that gave the Jew the courage to live and even to prosper behind ghetto walls. Conscious of the high ethical plane of his teachings, and disdainful of those who oppressed him, the Jew drew strength from his studies and grew in spiritual stature. The *yeshibah*, the rabbinic college, was the authoritative religious institution for the medieval and early modern Jew. That the Jew has survived in culture and spirit is due, in no small part, to the rabbinic college.

THE MAN

Among the teen-age lads who wandered from academy to academy in the Bohemian towns of the 1830's was one named Isaac Mayer Wise. Though he had but little formal schooling, this eager boy managed to educate himself and become a religious leader in a small community of his native land. But, despairing of his future in the Austria of Metternich and the Hapsburgs, the ambitious young man left for America, where the little congregation in Albany, one of the twenty or so synagogues on this continent, elected him its rabbi. In this land of opportunity, he soon began to make his way. Within four years of his arrival, the rabbi, in spite of his German brogue, had dined with Daniel Webster and exchanged pleasantries in the White House with Zachary Taylor. By 1854 Wise had gained such a reputation for his religious liberalism and his oratory that he was called to the largest Jewish community in the West, to Cincinnati.

What is the measure of this man? Like all great men, he was neither simple nor all of one piece. He was generous, charming, able. He was a soaring visionary, but also an astute politician, with a sense of reality and a lust for leadership; he was prepared to stoop in order to conquer, but he never lost sight of his goal. Above all, he was almost incredibly energetic, ever willing to give of himself to accomplish his purposes. Thus it was that this autodidact came to play many parts. He

was a rabbi, a historian, a religious poet, a publicist, a writer of prayer books, a dramatist, a novelist, a college president, and a roving missionary. He would go anywhere in the United States to address an audience or to dedicate a synagogue — and to make friends. He was God's dedicated salesman traveling out of Cincinnati, and in his mind and heart he carried a line of notions — theological, ethical, and cultural notions — which were ultimately to help make of American Jewry the greatest body of Jews the world had yet known.

In Wise's day, as now, a newspaper was a powerful weapon, and he gained a huge following through his English-language *Israelite* and his German-language *Deborah*. In his vaulting ambition, this rabbi, out on the frontier of Jewish life, made a further bid for influence by publishing a European edition of his German periodical. But his supreme characteristic was courage. Denounced as a heretic, excommunicated by his opponents, and thrown out of his job in Albany because he would not deny his principles or truckle to authority, he persisted in his integrity and lived to become one of the great religious leaders of nineteenth-century America. This was the twenty-seven-year-old man who landed at Castle Garden, New York, in July, 1846, with a wife and a child and two dollars in his pocket.

THE SCENE HE FOUND

When the young Bohemian took stock after he had landed, he found a frontier Jewry of about forty thousand people. There was no college, no learning, no Jewish cultural and intellectual activity of any consequence. In all America there was but one ordained officiating rabbi, the first in the almost two hundred years since Solomon Franco had landed in Boston in the 1640's.

Most Jewish ministers were "free lance" Germans, oriented to their European fatherland linguistically and ideologically. Though their own native countries had rejected them, they were perversely German to the core. America was their last resort; this was their exile. When the great David Einhorn came to this land at the age of forty-six, he was too old to change. The magazine he edited in ante-bellum days was in German, the language he loved. That generation of religious leaders had no real understanding of America, of its idiom, of its way of life, of its needs, of its hopes. Most of them, untutored, unhappy, frustrated men, meant well. But there were others, sheer adventurers, the offscourings of Europe, self-styled "reverends," who were worthy of anything but reverence. Not altogether untypical was the "rabbi" who had the cure of souls in the wickedest city of America in the early 1840's, New Orleans. He served both at the altar of Judaism and of the great god Bacchus or of his

less Olympian counterpart, John Barleycorn. He had either forgotten or refused to circumcise his children. He was a well-known actor in the local repertory theatre. But his great love was the fire-engine company of which he was captain. And when a religious service conflicted with a fire, he knew where his duty lay — and so much the worse for the service. On the eve of one Rosh Hashanah, an observant Jew who had watched his performance suggested that he not officiate the following day. Outraged, the indignant “rabbi” pounded the pulpit and bellowed: “By Jesus Christ, I have a right to pray” — and he did.

The presence of such individuals in the American pulpit only underscored American Jewry’s pressing need for proper rabbinical training and decent rabbinical standards. It is no wonder that Wise was to devote so much of his labor to the satisfaction of that need.

WHAT DID WISE WANT?

Very early after his arrival, Wise knew what he wanted. He wanted to create a united American Jewry, for he believed that only through unity could it be saved from dissolution and become, to use his own terms, “free,” “progressive,” and “enlightened.” And Wise was convinced that he was the latter-day Moses to accomplish that end.

THE INSTRUMENTALITY

Unlike Moses of old, Wise saw his prime instrumentality as a college, not as the sanctuary. Wise had swayed to and fro over the Talmud; he knew that, in the light of history, the *bet ha-midrash* was more authoritative than the synagogue. But this heir of the French Revolution wanted no old-fashioned *yeshibah*. The year that he came to Cincinnati was the very year in which, back in Breslau, Zecharias Frankel opened a theological seminary, conceived in the scientific spirit. Wise was also aware of the tremendous impact made by the new denominational colleges that were springing up by the dozen in the trans-Allegheny country. Jacksonian democracy and the nascent industrial revolution had decreed higher education as the answer to the needs of a new America dedicated to commerce and manufacturing. In a modern Jewish college, Wise believed, Judaism and Americanism would be well met. It was imperative that there be Jewish lore and secular learning for all.

The immigrant Wise was young enough and courageous enough to cut the umbilical cord to a European mother who had rejected him. America-oriented, he was never irrevocably committed to the Germanic tradition. Influenced by the ante-bellum pattern of denominational schools, he hoped to create a Jewish college of general studies out of which would grow a rabbinical seminary.

WHAT THE COLLEGE COULD DO

This man had a naive, almost frantic belief in the urgency of a Jewish college. For him, the college was the palladium that would guarantee Jewish survival in this land. It was the one, the only institution that could bring all American Jews together. Build it — build it well — and every problem of survival would be solved; every hope of creative achievement, realized. In column after column of *The Israelite* he pleaded his cause. What a pity that so many brilliant intellectuals are being wasted in peddling and storekeeping! What a tragedy that the youth of our country are being sacrificed “on the altars of Mammon”! We will never be respected by our neighbors until we have educated ourselves. Let the Jew go to school, enter into politics, edit newspapers; let him stand up to those bigots who attack him. An educated Jew is a self-respecting Jew. Men of learning are disciplined and can work together. We must spread Jewish and general knowledge if we are to raise the moral and intellectual standards of our people.

An American Judaism is about to be born, Wise predicted. Those who are native to this land will develop an American type of religion and will demand leaders responsive to them and to their needs. All this is inevitable. Therefore, let us preach and teach in the only language that they understand. Give them leadership, or Judaism will die. If there is a college to train men whom the Jews respect and admire, this land can

become a veritable Zion. Here, in a school of secular and Judaic studies, the religious ideals of our faith will find their highest expression and profoundly influence our fellow Americans. Wise was convinced that the Messiah was galloping at full speed to greet the oncoming twentieth century. He was sure that the ethical universalism of Reform Judaism was destined to become the philosophy of all Americans, Jews and Gentiles. Orthodox Christianity was doomed.

Cynical hindsight may brand all this as homiletic euphoria, madness, but it was this madness that created the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, the Hebrew Union College, and the Central Conference of American Rabbis.

THE DIFFICULTIES HE ENCOUNTERED

Thus it was that Wise felt it imperative to open a college to accomplish his purposes. He was no innovator; even that idea was not original with him. As early as 1821 a group of earnest American Jews, frightened by Christian missionary propaganda, had proposed the creation of an academy for the rising generation. Wise had been in this country for only two years when he appealed to the American Jews to create a congregational union which would concern itself primarily with education. But the young immigrant made no headway. Seven years later, when he was Cincinnati's new rabbi, Zion College, which he

had founded, failed through inadequate support and his own ineptitude in dealing with rival communities which desired for themselves the honor of sponsoring an academy.

The Civil War interrupted a third attempt at starting a college, but the conflict proved a blessing in disguise. The Jews began to rise in the social scale, for many of them had amassed fortunes. There were now at least 150,000 Jews in the country, and they needed a central institution of higher learning which could speak with authority on matters Jewish. Within twelve months after Lee's surrender, there were at least six proposals to establish a Jewish college, but formidable obstacles still remained to be hurdled. The immigrant masses kept streaming in. Many, escaping their European past, were indifferent or hostile to their ancestral traditions. Those who retained their loyalties were usually committed to a European Orthodoxy. Liturgical, religious, and ethnic differences were magnified. Religion was a fighting word. When the Independent Order of B'nai B'rith was founded in the 1840's, it was necessary to bar all religious and political discussion so that harmony and peace might be maintained and the society survive. Jewish social clubs may have called themselves the Harmony and the Concordia, but their members were prone to exhibit little concord and even less harmony.

Yet, though the masses were poor and indifferent, there were in every community men who strove for

unity in order to establish cultural institutions. Many of the Central European immigrants were caught up in the stream of American unifying forces. The growing federalism which they encountered in this country recalled the Germanic tradition of a united or federated Jewish community, and, as Jews who never ignored their kinship even in the midst of their bickering, they wished to come closer to one another as they fanned out southward and westward to occupy the plains and the prairies. In 1869 the first transcontinental railroad was completed, and the American union, already cemented by a bloody Civil War, was now re-enforced by bands of steel. And for the Jews, too, union and unity were magic words to create the agencies that would hold them together and implement their religious and cultural aspirations.

Now it was that the genius of Wise manifested itself. No one had succeeded in creating a viable school, not even Philadelphia's tireless Isaac Leeser, whose Maimonides College did not long survive its founder's death. Profiting from Leeser's mistakes and from his own failure with Zion College, Wise determined to create a congregational union primarily for the purpose of supporting a college. In that he was successful. His energy, his charm, and the enthusiastic devotion of a host of friends who rallied around him made it possible to create a union of synagogues in 1873. Wise had worked for twenty-five long years to achieve that goal, and in his moment of triumph he

was careful to evade the issue of Reform and Orthodoxy; he had set out to bridge the differences between the two groups. Without their joint efforts, there could be no union and no college. The school which opened its doors in 1875 was a *union* college designed to unite all American Jews; the constitution adopted by the new organization in 1873 had stated specifically that the Hebrew Theological Institute, as it was called, would serve a "united Israel."

THE SCHOOL HE BUILT

The College arose in Cincinnati, and Isaac Mayer Wise became its first president. True, New York City had at least ten times as many Jews as Cincinnati, but no school could be built in the Eastern metropolis where the radical Reformers and the Orthodox refused to work together. Not a single New York congregation, Reform or Orthodox, had joined the Union in 1873. Wise wanted the College to be situated in Cincinnati where he could personally watch over it and steer it between the Scylla and Charybdis of the two irreconcilable forces in American Jewry.

What a glorious moment it was for the Cincinnati rabbi as the opening hour approached! The new institution was to be a general college to educate the youth of America, but it was to be crowned in time by a religious seminary to train those graduates who had chosen the rabbinate as their lifework. Parodying

Henry Clay, the exultant Wise wrote that he would rather be president of the Hebrew Union College than Chief Justice of the United States.

And this was the school he opened: seventeen teen-age children gathered together in the subterranean gloom of the Mound Street Temple's vestry rooms. Four of these youngsters were still in grade school; one of them was a girl of eleven, who should have been sitting on the floor playing with jacks instead of conjugating irregular Hebrew verbs. The library was locked up every night, in a two-and-a half-foot box, not because of thieves, but because of mice. There was a faculty: one man; and when he could not cope with his mischievous charges, Wise himself was called in to teach. Only four of the whole lot had come to study. The others had come to make noise; they were still children.

The drab reality never robbed the buoyant leader of his resolution. He was too familiar with failure to be discouraged, too dead in earnest to allow his enthusiasm to flag. He moved forward to give his young students a scientific training, as he conceived it. The concept of learning, sound learning, dominated the school and the mother institution, for the Union had taken as its motto the rabbinic phrase: תלמוד תורה כנגד כלם, "Jewish knowledge outweighs everything else"; and the College, in the same spirit, adopted the biblical slogan: שלום רב לאהבי תורתך, "Great peace have they who love thy studies."

Almost immediately, Wise realized that his great plans for a general college and a seminary were impracticable. Few, if any, students came to study the secular disciplines in the temple cellars. By the middle and late 1870's, the municipal high schools and the state colleges had become secularized enough for the Jewish merchants to send their children to them. The Cincinnati rabbi had so few candidates, even for the rabbinic course, that he found it necessary to recruit bright children from the orphan asylums. Overnight the College became a rabbinical seminary, with afternoon classes only for the high school and university students who aspired to the rabbinate.

Wise had twenty-five years to build the school before he died at the turn of the century, and the school prospered under him. He was strongly rooted in the Bible, particularly in certain aspects of the Mosaic tradition. He hesitated, openly at least, to deny the validity even of rabbinic law. Yet he was never subservient to rabbinism; his attitude toward ritual and ceremonial was one of salutary neglect. Conviction and expediency alike made him a middle-of-the-road man. He was a gradualist, convinced that the environment, with an alchemy all its own, would dissolve the excrescences of the past and "purify" the faith. Because change was inevitable, he was willing to wait. Time was on his side.

Yet within a decade, possibly unwillingly, he was forced to align himself with the radicals. The extreme

Reformers were climbing into the saddle, and Wise's own students, most of whom were natives, pushed him to the left. And so when, finally, the Orthodox and the right-wing moderates began to desert the College, Wise had no choice. In 1885 he joined the radicals and gave his wholehearted approval to the Pittsburgh Platform. If he had to make a decision, there was no question where he would stand.

When the old man passed away in March, 1900, his successor referred to him as the Johanan ben Zakkai of his generation. In a way, it was an apt designation. He had not, it is true, saved an established Judaism and its academies, but he had built the first permanent Jewish institution of higher learning in the New World. To be sure, he had originated no philosophy of Reform, for the entire system had been worked out in Germany before ever Wise set foot on American soil. But he had created the institutions, primarily the College, which made it possible for Reform to live and develop here. The millions of Jews who have come after his time — whether they have agreed with him or not — have been profoundly influenced by the organizations he established and by the spirit of constructive adaptation which has distinguished these organizations. Together with Leeser, Wise was the most eminent Jewish spiritual pioneer of nineteenth-century America.

The men who followed him as leaders picked up the reins where he dropped them. Better trained than he,

they raised the academic standards of the seminary and committed themselves unreservedly to the scientific method. Today the Hebrew Union College is a complex of several schools, and before this year ends, these schools will have graduated, in the course of their history, almost one thousand rabbis, men who have carried the torch of liberalism to the farthest corners of this land and to the most distant continents. The sun never sets on the graduates of this institution.

THE OBLIGATION TO BE LIBERAL

Our way of life is not that of Isaac Mayer Wise. Yet we are his spiritual legatees, for his philosophy and practice of Judaism were in essence liberal. We are not *compelled*, as he was, to move forward, but I would be dismayed if we failed to do so. It is a privilege, I believe, to maintain the stream of free thought at this school. And at this hour, that privilege assumes the nature of an urgent obligation. Unchained and unshackled thinking is far more important now than it was in the days of the Founder. It was not difficult for Wise to move to the left, for he lived in an age of ascending liberalism. But less than two decades after his death, the First World War ushered in the present era of intellectual and spiritual reaction. In the moral economy of all Jewry and of America, too, our College has assumed an increasing importance because it is one

of the last refuges of the unfettered spirit. History looks to us for liberal loyalties.

A liberalism in the spirit of Isaac Mayer Wise must first of all come to terms with the past. We who are his successors do have an obligation to our people and their practices. With our customs and traditions in mind, our sages have pleaded with us in biblical phrases not to forsake the teachings of our mother. We do well to show deference to that which has gone before — as long as it defers to us as human beings. But we ought never to tolerate a situation where respect for that which has been lays a dead hand on the individual who reaches out for horizons of which our fathers never dreamt. We Jews can survive and we must survive — not because of our way of life, but because of our way of thought. Let us doff our hats to history, but let it never enslave us. We are distinguished today because we have escaped history. We are alive because the past has died in us. We liberals must love our people deeply and passionately, yet we must rebel against them implacably if they thwart our hopes as individuals or attempt to quench the inner light of protest and of personal aspiration. I am not rejecting the truths of yesterday when I remember that the revelation on Sinai occurred thousands of years ago and that every generation has its own Sinai unveiling new vistas of divinity and raising men to new moral heights.

That every man be left to chart his own anatomy of

liberalism is fully consistent with the teaching of Wise, and surely all will agree on the inalienable right of the individual to think for himself. As liberals, we must never betray our devotion to the historico-critical method of scientific inquiry. There is nothing more sacred than the student's obligation to investigate endlessly and to scrutinize without self-deception. To doubt is to begin to live and to worship. Every time we read a new work, we do well to forewarn ourselves with the moron's proverb: "I know it's true; I seen it in a book." If we have open minds, we should be prepared to acknowledge the truth even if it mocks our fondest prejudices. There must be no conflict in the Jew between himself as a religionist and as a man of culture, lest he tear himself violently asunder. There is, however, this precaution to bear in mind. One must be ready to respect reason, even to reverence it and to follow it wherever it may lead, but the quest must always be tempered with love and pity.

The true marks of the liberal are his respect for the sanctity of the individual and his belief that society and religion have an obligation to foster personality. Every human being has the inviolable right to realize his fullest potentiality in the realm of the mind and the spirit and the emotions. Freedom of conscience and freedom of expression are the foundation stones of our very existence.

There are today too many Reform Jews who have ceased to be liberals. Their Reform, crystallized into

a new Orthodoxy, is no longer dynamic. Shocked by the Hitlerian catastrophe, many have turned their backs on the future to seek comfort in the nostalgia of a romanticized Jewish past which never existed. We cannot lead our people forward by stumbling backward. That half of the Jewish world which lives on these shores may well turn to us in mute challenge; the millions of our fellow-Jews who live across the seas have the right to demand of us that we set them an example of broad culture, of sound learning, and of conscientious leadership.

It is a great privilege to be of those who study and learn that they may teach, that they may serve as links in a majestic tradition which reaches into the misty past and, we hope, will yet stretch out into the infinite future. Let us, who call ourselves students, be humbly grateful for our lot in life, and every eve, as we pass through these portals, may we never fail to reflect reverently on the benediction of Rabbi Nehunya ben Ha-Kanah: מודה אני לפניך יי אלהי ששמת חלקי מיושבי בית המדרש, "I thank Thee, O Lord, my God, that Thou hast given me a portion among those who sit in the house of study."

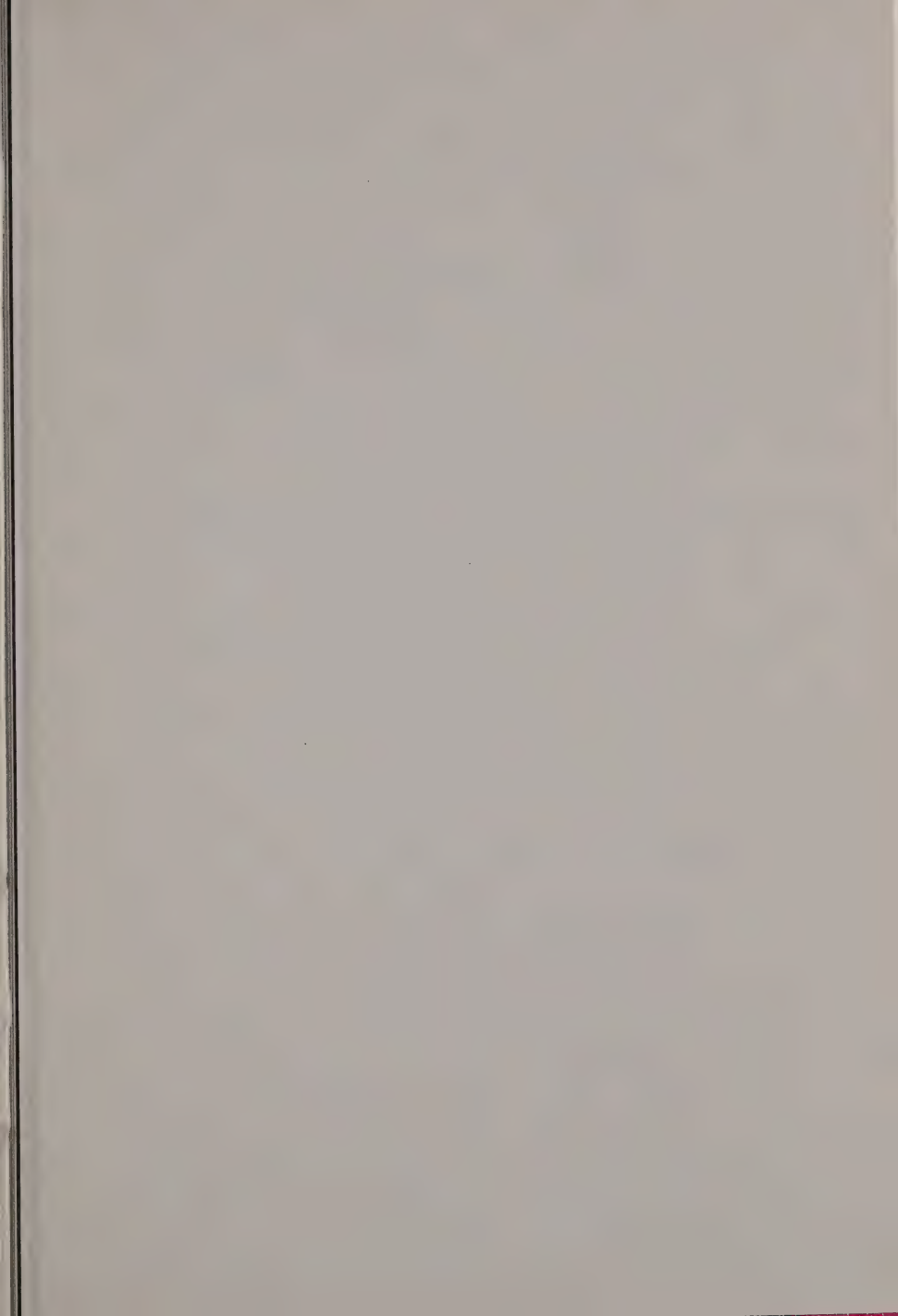
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THE MATERIAL for this study has been drawn largely from the memoirs and writings of Isaac M. Wise himself. Most of his opinions were expressed on the editorial pages of *The (American) Israelite*, 1854-1900. Of the various autobiographical works and fragments which he published, the following two are most important: *Reminiscences by Isaac M. Wise*, translated by David Philipson (Cincinnati, 1901), and Isaac M. Wise, *The World of My Books*, translated by Albert H. Friedlander, *American Jewish Archives*, VI (1954), 107 ff.

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